



EVERYDAY CONNECTORS

2020 | SUPPORTED BY BEFRIEND INC



THIS IS AN ILC INITIATIVE (INFORMATION, LINKAGES AND CAPACITY BUILDING)



CONTENTS.

pg.3

HELLO.

pg.4

COVID-19.

pg.6

STORIES.

pg.22

FOR MORE INFO.

HELLO.

This publication has been produced and printed by Befriend Inc. We are a social enterprise based here in Perth, Western Australia, that exist to support inclusive, connected communities.

What does that mean? Well, it means that we believe that the world is a much nicer place to be when we have strong and diverse social relationships with others.

Sounds simple, right? Well, for some, making new friends is really challenging and there are often invisible barriers in the way that can be tough to overcome. Loneliness can creep up on any of us at any time and we are all vulnerable to feelings of isolation. We move cities and find ourselves with a much smaller social circle than before. We study abroad. We live with disabilities. We age. We face challenges with our mental health. We come out of long-term relationships and find ourselves with fewer friends. We have social anxiety. The list goes on.

It's our shared responsibility to create a strong community that is built on the contributions and participation of everyone. It's not enough to be welcoming; we have to actively and intentionally think about how we dismantle barriers that prevent people from joining in. If we don't, then, well, we're all missing out on some awesome relationships in our lives.

No one program, service, or initiative is the answer to nurturing inclusive, connected communities. It takes a movement. It takes all of us, as neighbours, as community leaders, as neighbourhood houses, as social group members, as community services, as family members, as supporters, as friends; It takes all of us. Befriend is a catalyst within this movement, unlocking the potential of individuals and organisations to nurture inclusive, connected communities in which we all belong.

You can find out more about the Befriend community and how we support human connection right here in Perth by heading to www.befriend.org.au. But enough about us.





COVID-19.

COVID-19 taught us many things and it affected us all in different ways. Physically distancing from our friends, family and broader community was challenging and it amplified what many of us already knew; that social connection is invaluable. We all need it. The relationships we have with others help us cope with change and give us a sense of normalcy amidst the chaos.



Here at Befriend, we witnessed an upswell of community activism, friendship, and creativity, as people jumped online, joined phone trees, wrote letters, and got busy connecting with the people they care about.

We wanted to hear some of these stories. We put out a request for people to share their tales with us about how they experienced or supported connection over these last few months. In sharing these stories with the world, we hope to inspire people to think more deeply about connection in their own contexts. We wanted to show everyone that social inclusion isn't difficult and that it should just be embedded to our societal culture in our everyday interactions. If you take just one thing from this little collection of stories, let it be this; strong communities are built on the contributions of everyone.



Without further ado, these are the stories of Everyday Connectors who participated in extraordinary moments of connection amidst COVID-19, in their own words.

COME SAY HI!



BEFRIEND

RAHUL & ACTIVATE MENTAL HEALTH.

When things started canceling out, around mid-March, we knew we had to get online. We didn't give it a second thought. It was slow to begin with and we had to adjust, but we did a lot of research and saw what worked in other groups. Initially, we started off just hosting informal chats to try to support connection in that way but we realised that we could experiment with different activities that would really bring like-minded people together, interacting over a mutual experience. We explored book clubs and travel photography, different games; Jackbox Games, which are these party games that involve different activities, were so fun and just made it easy to enjoy these opportunities. It gave everyone a sense of banter and enjoyment which we all needed.

We actually had some people joining us from other parts of the country, which was really, really cool. But, my biggest surprise was that people who attended online have made genuine friendships with one another, that are being taken offline now.

The regularity and consistency of engaging online over a fun activity meant that a real human connection could be made and can continue.

We've noticed this rejuvenated sense of connection since the restrictions have eased. We're actually keeping the online format too, going forward, as it's just another barrier we can all overcome. Sometimes just getting out of the house to go to a social event can be challenging so this helps break that down and brings more people in to be included. It's a different learning curve but it's been great.

My advice to others looking to create more inclusive connections in their local community would be to look for new and inspiring formats and activities. In my opinion, there's just no substitute for connecting with other like-minded people. It's my biggest source of happiness to be able to do that and see others do that. That's what social inclusion means to me; the ability to connect with any person of any background. There's always something to learn and enjoy with every interaction you have with another person. And you can be so creative with how you connect with like-minded folk; A lot of what we do in-person is more than possible online, so you can really get creative and support spaces for fun connection in ways that make sense for you.

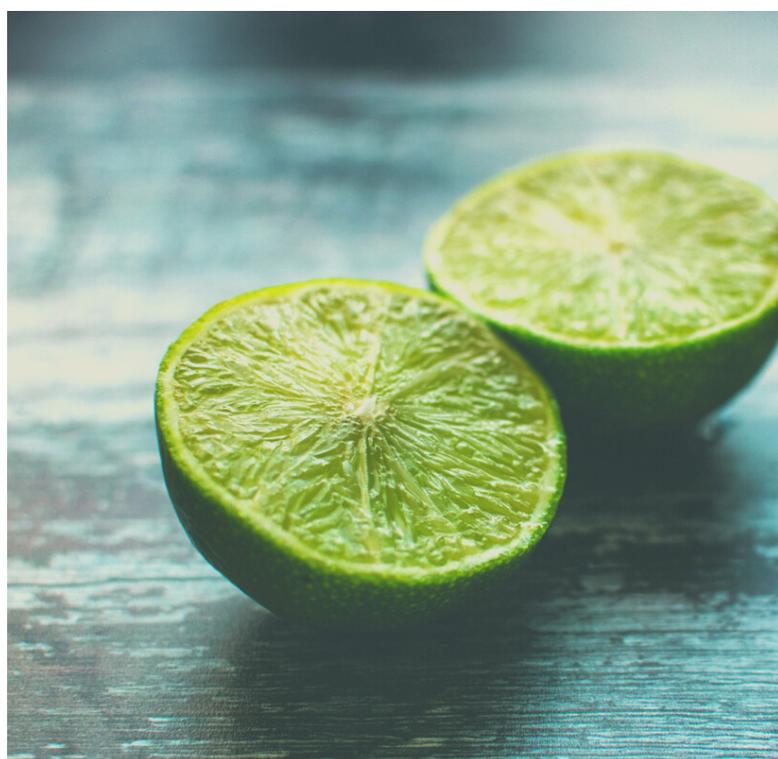
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MEAGAN, LEMON, LIMES & CHUTNEY.

I've lived here for a long time and I've been meaning to connect with my neighbours for years. Obviously, I work and connect in other spaces, but I didn't really know my neighbours. I live with a physical disability and going out to socialise, well, you never know how accessible things are going to be! I suppose, what COVID-19 did was provide an opportunity to connect with the people on my street. It's a small street; maybe 30 houses and I'm in the middle.

Just before the pandemic, I had connected with one neighbour randomly at the local community centre (she actually has lived over the road from me for over 20 years and we'd never really crossed paths before), and then, when COVID happened and everyone started spending more time at home, I also got talking to my next-door neighbour over the fence. The three of us then planned a Friday morning physically-distanced coffee catch-up.

During the coffee catch-up, a neighbour was walking by with her dog and we got talking and she said she'd come along to the next one, and over time, it just grew to maybe six or seven of us and from that, other connections grew.



We started a chat group through Messenger so we could stay in touch and we also met for one or two driveway drinks on Saturday nights; it's amazing really. 20 years (or more!) of having it on my to-do list to connect with my neighbours and it didn't take much engineering. We just let it grow organically.

I did ask myself if the group was really inclusive at one point and questioned whether we should invite the men of the street to join but in the end, I decided to leave it as a "women's group", to create a safe place for us to socialise, exchange items or things we needed, and support one another.

One of the ladies in the group had these three super fertile citrus trees that produce more fruit than she knew what to do with! So, I got a bucket load and started experimenting! I dried out the limes for our Saturday Night Driveway Drinks cocktails! One of the ladies had excess jars so I used those to make some of the best lemon and lime chutney you'll ever have. Another lady offered to make the labels so we had this little production line going of one neighbour passing on the fruit, another providing the jars, me making the chutney and another neighbour making the labels and then it was redistributed back out to the street again! It was lovely, because COVID-19 was quite gloomy and all about illness, whereas the lemons and limes were like sunshine and freshness!

Sometimes, I look out my window now and see some of the neighbours who might not have previously known each other well, coming and going into each other's houses to pick up something or drop it off, or just interact. The Messenger chat is still active. It's a trust thing, I suppose. I know that I could knock on any of their doors and ask for something whereas I probably wouldn't have before.

I think there are two pieces of advice I'd offer to others looking to make new connections. The first one is around consistency; I set up the coffee catch-ups to be regular Friday morning so everyone knew the space was there. You need to keep on turning up and don't give up; don't just knock on your neighbour's door once, knock lots of times! And, the second piece of advice is around valuing what others have to offer. We need to value everyone's contributions. That's what social inclusion means to me; sharing, being able to feel valued and make a valuable contribution to others.

**I FEEL MORE CONNECTED
WHEN I CAN SHARE
SOMETHING USEFUL AND I
FEEL MOST USEFUL WHEN I
CAN CONTRIBUTE
SOMETHING OF VALUE.**



PHOTO CREDIT: CITY OF KWINANA

INGER, STEVE & THE SINGING UKES.

Steve: We quickly realised that the first pillar in keeping us together was that we needed to embrace social media and online technology. Without that, we'd be lost. I'm not a 'tech-savvy' person at all; I exist in the real world with real things.

Inger was really the foundation block of the group, helping us transition online, and without her, we'd have fragmented. The thing with a singing group is that you can't all sing together because of the time-delay, so really, I needed to sing solo as the 'leader' and set the scene for the others and I was self-conscious of doing that in front of, not just our original members and familiar faces, but new ones too who were joining the group online! But, we did some 1:1 practice sessions to polish it up and I decided that I couldn't do this half-heartedly and had to give it a good go; I quite enjoyed rising to the challenge!

We had new members join us and they kept coming back so they must be enjoying themselves! We chat a lot, about all kinds of things; sometimes, we're so busy chatting and enjoying ourselves, it's a struggle to get everyone back to playing! I enjoy seeing people get more out of their music; and leave with big smiles on their faces. My biggest concern was how we stayed in touch with some who weren't online.

Inger: Although we didn't have everyone's contact details, we managed to keep the majority of the group in contact and connected. Everyone knows somebody else in the group so we were able to share on news and send well-wishes. We sent SMS texts and emails; even if we didn't get a reply all the time, we all did our best to reach out to everyone. Steve did a USB drop-off with all the song music so we could all be playing the same songs each week. We encouraged members to share videos of them practising – that's been great, actually! People who wouldn't normally 'lead' or step-up had the confidence to go 'solo'; we had people taping or sharing their progress or doing tutorials on finger-picking so we could share it with a wider ukulele community online. The chats have been hilarious! Our tea-break in person would be more split and we'd chat in groups of two or three and mingle. But, the Zoom sessions were amazing and we learnt so much about each other because we're all chatting together; we were all part of the same conversation.

**SOCIAL INCLUSION
MEANS BEING
ACCEPTING OF,
AND BEING
ACCEPTED BY,
EVERYONE,
REGARDLESS OF
YOUR
DIFFERENCES.**



VIRGINIA & SUDBURY HOUSE.

We pretty much had to close overnight. It was so, so hard. We were asking ourselves “how can we support the community and how can we reach those who need us most?”.

One of the things we do really well is work as a collective with other organisations in the local area. One of the project coordinators set up a directory where we could all log our strategies throughout COVID-19 so that we could connect people into what they needed. The other thing we did early-on was send out updates twice a week to everyone we could in multiple different languages. We tried to say that ‘whilst we can be together physically, we are still here for you and to help you connect’.

Our social choir group – With One Voice Mirrabooka – went online to keep up the sense of fun and boost morale when it was really needed!

The choir exists to be all-inclusive; it’s about strengthening community and inspiring people to find their voice. It was really fun; hilarious, in fact! We laughed so much and wore silly hats, we listened to each other. Not all members could join in though as some didn’t have access to the technology, so we began asking if we could receive donations to pass onto those in isolation. We actually received an iPad which was great.

We often connect with homeless people and one of the things that really upsets me is how little contact information we had. I don’t know where some even are and I miss my coffees with them. I look out the window every day and hope to see them. That’s been a big lesson for me and advice I’d offer to everyone: if we want to create a world where people can belong, to be, and become, then as a community, we must not let anyone slip through the cracks.

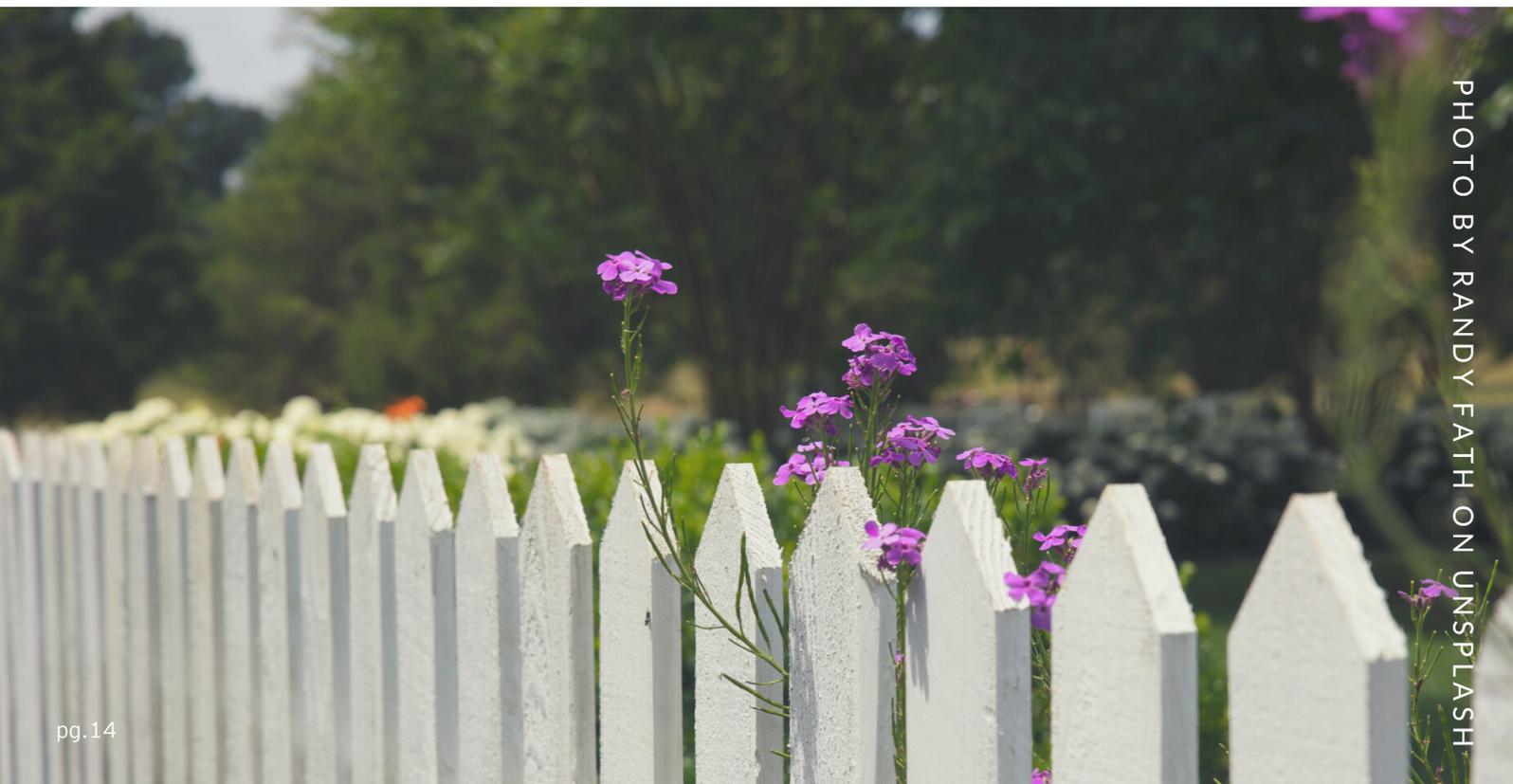
**TRUE SOCIAL INCLUSION
MEANS TREATING
EVERYONE AS EQUALS. IT
MEANS NOT MAKING ANY
ASSUMPTIONS...
EVERYONE HAS THEIR
OWN STORY, AND WE
SHOULD BE LISTENING TO
UNDERSTAND THEM.
TOKENISM DOESN'T
WORK. GENUINE
RELATIONSHIPS COME
FROM CARING ABOUT ONE
ANOTHER.**

SHANI & THE WEST BEACY BUNCH.

We started off doing stuff about a year ago. Myself and a friend both shared an understanding that in an uncertain and unsustainable future, there may be times where we need someone in our geographical community. We were thinking more about climate change, sharing resources ; but we never really thought of a pandemic. For us, it wasn't so much about mutual interests and passions, but more about taking random people in a distinct geographical area and developing a sense of community and resilience.

The two of us started off by putting notes out to about 250 houses – something like “come and meet your neighbours!” – and door knocking, and then we had a picnic where about 120 people came along. At the picnic, we collected email addresses so we could communicate better. We had a map of the local area and thought, ‘why not find one or two people in every street to act as a geographical coordinator, so they could do deliveries of notes and handle communication easier ; and we did!

We've done a bit over the last year ; a plant swap, a chance to “come and meet the goats”, a games night, a movie night ; sub-groups also started popping up, like one focused on guerilla gardening in some of our shared public spaces, and olive picking, which never ended up happening because of COVID.



When things started to look bad with the pandemic, I sent out a note to the street coordinators and we decided to arrange a separate landline and phone number so that people could call if they needed something. Myself and a few others shared the responsibility of that so it wasn't up to one person. Street coordinators distributed the number so everyone knew it was there. We had about 27 people who were willing volunteers, making hand sanitiser and things like that. But we only had one call for help in the end.

One nice story I remember was that someone in the group was looking out for her elderly neighbour and, despite him being quite adamant that he didn't need a daily call, we arranged that anyway, just to check in. This lady called him every day and they would chat... and now things have eased up, they still continue their daily chats. Their friendship has reached a point where if he doesn't hear from her that day, he gives her a call to check that she's alright! It makes sense really; they're both such interesting people so it's natural that they developed a relationship.

We arranged Friday night drinks over Zoom, which didn't really work as there wasn't a tradition there already and a lot of people were okay as they were; they had their support and that was enough.

Later on, we arranged for my brother and niece to get on the back of a ute with their battery-powered amplifier and we drove around whilst they played music and took song requests from people. That was great fun, watching everyone congregate in their driveways at 1.5m apart from one another!



PHOTO BY KEVIN WOLF
ON UNSPLASH

Since then, we've also arranged a few outdoor events – outdoor seems a bit safer right now – like a planting and weeding morning. We celebrated the winter solstice with a community fire on an empty block on our street. We asked the landowner and checked in with the council, I sourced some fire pits within a few hours and that was that!

I think there's been a few things that have changed or improved as a result of our experiences together. Firstly, we have more of an identity now. Like, we ARE the West Beacy Bunch. It's known and there's some pride in that. People are also pretty amazed at what we've achieved and there's a sense that they want it to keep going. I think there's been some real bonding between the smaller group of street coordinators, too. That relationship has strengthened a lot.

And also, there's an attitude of 'getting it done now' that I can see. Like, rather than waiting on someone else (say, within a council) to come and do it, there's a recognition that public spaces are owned spaces that can be designed and controlled by the people living there. There's some bravery in taking these spaces into our own hands.

Some advice that I'd give to others to help them create geographical community connections is that there isn't anything wrong with the 'benevolent dictator model'. If you're a good organiser and a bit of a go-getter, start it off yourself. Just be prepared to listen and respond to people's needs and wants, and be willing to delegate and let go of some of the control and let people run with it. We didn't set out with a vision of what the group would become; we just started it up and let time tell us what it is and what it could be.

SOCIAL INCLUSION MEANS, NOT JUST THAT EVERY PERSON IS INVITED AND ENCOURAGED, BUT YOU WORK TO DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP WITH EVERYONE. IT'S ALL ABOUT CONNECTING - AND FINDING CONNECTION.

FIND A CONNECTION WITH THE ONES WHO AREN'T COMING ALONG. WHEN I SEE A HOUSE THAT ISN'T ENGAGING, I START THINKING, HOW CAN I FORM A CONNECTION WITH THEM...? IRRESPECTIVE OF WHO THEY ARE.

JONI'S NEIGHBOURLY CONNECTIONS.

My husband and I printed off about 30 of the 'neighbour contact' sheets, filled in our details, and delivered them to each mailbox in our block. We already had a small Facebook group going as we held a little meet-up with a few neighbours last year, but we saw this as a chance to extend that out a little to others. On the sheet, we provided our mobile numbers and a link to join the Facebook Group to keep each other up to date, or help each other out, during COVID-19 lockdown.

Some people signed up to the group and there were offers to help feed pets, offers of birthday cakes for anyone celebrating a birthday in isolation, sharing of garden tools, people offering honey from their home hives.

Some people who didn't have the internet called on the mobile to say hi. An elderly couple called and, whilst they didn't need anything from us, they were asking how they could help and contribute, offering on their support. I think it probably made them feel less afraid and it made them feel good to know that we were all looking out for each other.

That's some advice I'd give to others; nobody wants to join a group with the idea of being helpless. Our Facebook Group was originally founded as a simple veggie-swap between neighbours; limes and lemons, herbs and excess plants could be passed around, that kind of thing. If you create a common ground that can support opportunities where everyone can contribute or swap something, when it reaches a point where you do need to ask for something, there's a foundation of a social relationship in place and it isn't about someone being helpless.

THAT'S WHAT SOCIAL INCLUSION MEANS TO ME - SUPPORTING OPPORTUNITIES TO BELONG AND CONTRIBUTE, AND ALL THE THINGS THAT GO WITH THAT, LIKE THE CREATION OF SAFE SPACES TO BE VULNERABLE [BECAUSE ONE DAY, IT MIGHT BE YOUR TURN TO BE VULNERABLE AND YOU MIGHT NEED SOMEONE...

ANY ONE OF US COULD'VE CONTRACTED COVID AND NEEDED A NEIGHBOUR], IT'S A PLACE TO HOLD EACH OTHER AND ENGAGE WITH ONE ANOTHER AS EQUALS, AND AS COMMUNITY MEMBERS.

BEK & JESS.



Bek: My friend Jess, who has a physical disability, provided me with emotional and social support during COVID-19. We've known each other for 5 or 6 years now. She came to the organisation I worked at for support, and we were matched together because of our similar personalities and interests and we connected from there. When I was made redundant it was sort of a 'good news/bad news' type situation because, hey, I didn't have a job anymore but also, like, cool, because we could be friends on Facebook and have a friendship! When I moved to a different organisation, she came over there for support and the friendship continued in both that context and outside of that too, doing fun stuff together.

We both got Nintendo Switches last year and I remember hearing a lot about this Animal Crossing game and we spoke about that for a bit. I was pretty adamant that I had to get my studies out of the way first because I have no self-control when it comes to not playing a new game when it comes out! But Jess was so thoughtful and ordered a copy for both of us as an end-of-semester-present! So, I would drive to hers and we'd sit in the park and play together or play online. It's been great!

Jess' power assist wheelchair arrived shortly after lockdown and initially, I invited her out to test it and get used to it, and it gave me an opportunity to bring my roller skates and practice – as my sport had been put on hold due to COVID. But it sort of ended up with Jess encouraging me more to go skating; she'd text me and say 'don't forget to bring your skates!'...I think she sensed that I wasn't getting the chance to do something I loved doing and that thoughtful transition was one of those moments where I realised that I had a real friend in Jess who cared and supported me in my interests and wellbeing. We'd go for rolls around the park together.

For me, my friendships tend to develop around shared interests. I think that's important. Whether that's gaming, community inclusion, shared interest in Pokemon or Animal Crossing, skill-swapping with others... I think it just helps people to connect if there's a common thing there that you're interested in.

The vision of social inclusion should be simple; everyone is included and valued, and is invited to gatherings. It's like, I wish Befriend didn't need to exist. That the things Befriend stands for just become a part of everyday life.



PHOTO BY SARA KURFESS ON UNSPLASH

Jess: We've known each other for a long time and the friendship is absolutely perfect. Honestly, there's not much more I can say on that. She's really one of the first people I ever felt comfortable with, where I could be myself. It's authentic. I'm pretty quirky and there's just nothing I can say or do that surprises her and it's the same with me!

Even before COVID-19, we stayed connected in different ways because she lives about half an hour away from me, each way. But over the last few months, we've spent time on Facetime, played Word with Friends; sometimes whilst on Facetime to each other! It's great because all you need is internet connection to play! We played Animal Crossing a lot and did virtual visits to each other's islands. She would bring her roller skates over and I'd go out in my wheelchair, so we'd both be rolling, or she'd bring one of her dogs. Bek actually broke her ankle skating a while back and it was a nasty break that needed a lot of intensive therapy. So I was trying to get her on the skates a bit more so she would feel comfortable and build up her confidence again. And she'd do the same with me too, in knowing when to push and how hard. There's a lot of trust between us.

One of my favourite memories was on one of our rolling adventures. We were taking selfies for a competition that promoted social distancing and Bek was on a bench and I was in front – I usually don't like taking selfies but I quite enjoyed it as Bek always makes it fun! My advice for others looking to make friends would be to just give it a go. Even if it's scary, just give it a go because you never know who you're going to meet.

TO ME, SOCIAL INCLUSION MEANS FORGETTING WHAT'S ON THE OUTSIDE AND GO UP TO SOMEONE WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED, OR WITH A MENTAL BLINDFOLD... WHAT'S ON THE OUTSIDE DOESN'T MATTER, AND WE SHOULDN'T JUDGE A BOOK BY IT'S COVER.

MICHAEL, SANDRA & THE PARTICIPANT REFERENCE GROUP.

Sandra: Normally we would have these Participant Reference Group meetings in-person about every two months, but we decided to do it on Zoom due to COVID-19. We asked people if that's something they'd be interested in and got a good response. It was great actually because we had some participants join the online meeting from the Great Southern, which we never expected. We didn't know that Zoom would be a great way to break down that barrier and make it an approachable situation.

Two of the participants actually recognised each other right at the beginning and there was this moment of 'is that you? It IS you! Nice to see you again, it's been so long!', and they had this moment of reconnection back and forth after many years. They've continued to catch up too and stay connected!

One of the participants also did a great job at the Acknowledgement of Country, which was something he was keen to do. He was really proud of that because it's a key role for a meeting and he felt proud to be the one doing that.

To me, social inclusion means that there's no power imbalance. Everyone is level and on the same field and it's a two-way street to give and take help, and to feel included. Everyone should have the opportunity to connect and be a part of something great.

Michael: I've been a part of the group since 2001. I wanted to be a part of it because I have a heart for people. I'm very compassionate. I wanted to get closer and closer and do more and more; not just be a client. I'm a quick learner. I like being a part of the group because it encourages people to do more and how to do it and you gain confidence. You can just take your time and be patient. I'm a bit of a peacekeeper; I like to keep the peace and tell people to keep calm when I need to!

THAT'S ALL, FOLKS.

Thanks for taking the time to read these stories. We hope that you've been inspired to think more deeply about how you might create more inclusive opportunities for connection. People are awesome and the more space we make in our lives to interact with other awesome people, the happier we all become. We all have unique gifts, characteristics and quirks to share. We all have value and we all have the right to belong.

If you want to know more about what Befriend is doing to help support more inclusive, connected communities here in Perth and beyond, then get in touch with us via our website.

Alternatively, look for Befriend on Meetup.com, and you'll find something called "The Befriend Social Network", where you can browse a whole bunch of interesting open-invite social events hosted by local residents who just want to meet new people and create fun memories doing the things they love with other people who love it, too.



PHOTO OF SOME OF THE BEFRIEND TEAM
TAKEN BY LUKE RILEY PHOTOGRAPHY



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